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SUBJECT: URUGUAY: MUJICA 2.0 UNVEILED IN BRAZIL?

REF: Montevideo 535 and previous

¶1. (U) This telegram is sensitive but unclassified, and not for Internet distribution.

SUMMARY  
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¶2. (SBU) The FA may have regained some lost ground in the ongoing presidential race with the party's ticket, Jose Mujica and Danilo Astori, making a high-profile three-day visit to Brazil that culminated in a heavily photographed meeting with President Lula de Silva. For Mujica, the trip offered a real opportunity not only to try on a new suit for the first time in memory, but also to strike a presidential air. The degree to which both are perceived to have fitted could make a real difference to his chances during the coming months. End Summary.

A Busy Schedule  
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¶3. (SBU) Early on August 4, FA presidential candidate Jose Mujica and running mate Danilo Astori headed a 13-person delegation on a three-day visit to Brazil. Other notables in the team included the ex-labor minister, Eduardo Bonomi (a close Mujica associate and a current senator), the president of the soccer player's union Enrique Saravia and Claudia Hugo, Astori's secretary and companion. Technically, the team was primarily in Brazil to discuss Mercosur and the proposed integration of the Uruguayan and Brazilian electrical grids, but as the phalanx of television cameras and press made clear, the visit's function as a campaign device was very much in the foreground.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the Lula meeting, Mujica met with Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim, Astori talked with Economic Secretary Henrique Pinheiro, and Bonomi attended talks with various legislators. The press conference that followed Mujica and Astori's 45-minute meeting with Lula ended up providing the finale, with Mujica presenting the Brazilian president a portrait of the "Father of Uruguay," General Artigas; a national soccer jersey signed by the Uruguayan soccer star Alcides Ghiggia, and a drum decorated with the maps of Brazil and Uruguay. The shirt was a somewhat playful gift, given that it was signed by the very man whose goal had defeated the Brazilian team in the world cup final of 1950. Lula appeared to take the teasing well, however, holding the shirt up against himself for size and obligingly banging Mujica's drum.

High Profile Political Gold-Dust  
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¶5. (SBU) Politically, it is the symbolic aspects of Mujica's visit that are of the greatest relevance. The FA's presidential candidate is working hard to temper his radical leftist reputation with gestures that indicate a tilt towards more moderate policies. During the visit, Mujica described Lula's government as a "very interesting model that teaches much about what can be done from a

leftist perspective." Brazil's reputation as successful moderate leftist economy allows Mujica to cast his proposed administration in the same light. These efforts to win votes through allusions to Brazilian success are complimented by Mujica's increasingly explicit attempts to draw parallels between himself and the popular Lula (both men, famously, come from humble backgrounds) whom he describes as an old friend (reftel). Lula himself appeared to respond warmly to the visit, but while some Uruguayan commentators felt this constituted an endorsement of Mujica's candidacy, Lula has made no such explicit comment on the subject.

¶6. (SBU) The visit provided the stage for Mujica's debut as a presidential figure. Mujica's casual home-spun image both fuels and limits his domestic support, with critics arguing that his plain-talking rustic approach would make him a poor representative of Uruguay in the more refined world in international politics (reftel). Travelling to Brazil has offered Mujica the chance to partially recast himself in the role of an international statesman. Usually clad in an open neck shirt, generously proportioned trousers and somewhat saggy knitwear, Mujica's first-ever suit fitting formed such a visual contrast that it became front page news, even if he still refused to wear a necktie. It is worth noting that no previous visit to a neighboring country by a Uruguayan presidential candidate has attracted anything like the same volume of press and television coverage at home.

A New, Business Savvy, Mujica?  
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¶7. (SBU) Mujica generated further gains by the economic and commercial nature of the visit. His often awkward relationship with the business community has been seen by some as a weak flank in his presidential bid, but after the meeting with Lula, Mujica announced

that Brazil would support Uruguay's efforts at bilateral grid integration. The long proposed project has been stalled by Argentina, which has blocked the release of Mercosur funds to support it. Both Mujica and Astori have expressed their more general belief that the much-criticized Mercosur trading block could work to Uruguay's advantage if properly managed. Note: The GOU has been discussing with Brazil the possibility of moving the project forward for some time, but progress has been elusive. End Note.

¶8. (SBU) The members of the FA ticket also used their time in Brazil to send some wider political signals. In interviews given during their stay, both Mujica and Astori spoke in glowing terms about Brazil's role in the region, describing the country as the natural leader of Mercosur and emphasizing the need for Uruguay to deepen relations with its giant neighbor, described by Astori as Uruguay's principal client. Understanding that such words could be interpreted as something of a snub to Argentina, Mujica artfully added that he is confident his government would be able to reach an understanding with the Argentine government regarding the ongoing dispute over the Botnia paper mill.

¶9. (SBU) In response to the visit, the rival Blanco candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle remarked that Uruguay should guard its independence and not be seen to align itself with any one country. Mujica retorted that he had visited as a friend and not as a "suck-up" and that, moreover, Lacalle "had knocked-back whisky with every gringo ambassador in town." He also rhetorically asked what was so bad about visiting a friend to ask for some machinery and materials to build houses for the poor. (Mujica has recently promised to begin construction on homes for low-income families within 15 days of assuming the presidency.)

Mujica 2.0: A Vote Winner?  
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¶10. (SBU) Playing off the success of the Brazil visit, there are yet more travels in the near future for Mujica and Astori, who will follow up with trips to Chile and Argentina Sept 21-22, and where they are expected to meet with presidents Bachelet and Fernandez de Kirchner. The visit helped the Mujica-Astori campaign somewhat, with local polls showing a 1-2 point bump as a result. The trip is another example of the Mujica team's skill at addressing and defusing criticism by the opposition, in this case the concern that he is not "presidential" enough and does not have sufficient foreign

policy experience.